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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000489

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN DIPLOMACY FAILS: ABBAS SNUBS HAMAS IN  
DAMASCUS

REF: DAMASCUS 471

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Classified By: Classified by CDA Michael Corbin for reasons 1.5 b and d  
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11. (C) Summary: President Asad received Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) July 6 but failed to convince Abbas to meet Hamas Politburo chief Khaled Meshal. In addition to FM Muallem, Abu Mazen met leaders of several Palestinian groups on July 7. Abu Mazen apparently agreed to allow a PA delegation to meet Hamas officials in Egypt next week, but his refusal to meet with Meshal on this trip prompted accusations by Hamas officials that the PA was putting Palestinian interests behind U.S. and Israeli positions. Though Bashar failed in trying to arrange a Abbas-Meshal meeting, he will try to claim Syria's commitment to Palestinian reconciliation as titular head of the Arab League. The single-minded SARG focus for this visit on Palestinian reconciliation may have backfired and once again demonstrated the limits of Syrian diplomacy. End Summary

12. (C) Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas arrived with his wife July 6 for a two-night stay that included a meeting with President Asad, a session with FM Muallem, and discussions with various Palestinian groups (PIJ, PLFP-GC, and the DFLP) based in Damascus. This was Abu Mazen's first visit to Damascus (not including the March 29-30 Arab League Summit) since January 2007. According to our sources, Abbas provided information on PA negotiations with Israel, while Asad and Muallem briefed on Syria's indirect talks with Israel in Istanbul. Abbas reportedly said coming to Syria was like "coming to our second country." (Note: Abbas's family fled the West Bank in 1948 and resettled in Syria, where he taught elementary school and studied law at Damascus University.)

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Syrian Focus on Reconciliation  
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13. (C) According to the Norwegian Ambassador here, Asad told Norwegian FM Store the previous week (reftel) that he was very focused on promoting reconciliation among Palestinian groups, particularly Hamas and Fatah. Bashar said there was a "synergy" between the Golan and Palestinian tracks, and he believed the two were linked. Syria could play a positive role, said Asad, but it would not push the two sides (Hamas and Fatah) to meet if they were not ready. Doing so would only widen their differences.

14. (C) On July 3, Bashar hosted Meshal in a publicized

tete-a-tete to discuss Hamas' latest reconciliation proposal.

According to press and other sources, the Hamas proposal included four main components: (1) establishing a unified government to control the West Bank and Gaza; (2) reconstructing Palestinian security forces under one command; (3) forming a transition government; and (4) scheduling early elections. According to al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi, Asad agreed to present the proposal to Abbas in the hope of arranging a one-on-one meeting between the two Palestinian leaders. But Asad reportedly cautioned Meshal that there was a good chance Abu Mazen would reject this attempt.

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Abu Mazen Rejects Meeting With Hamas  
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15. (C) Prior to Abbas' arrival, PA officials had already announced publicly that the PA President would not be meeting Meshal. Bashar tried to convince him to reconsider this position in their July 6 meeting, but Abu Mazen was adamantly opposed to the idea absent Hamas agreement to return Gaza to PA control and to accept previous agreements reached between the PA and Israel. Abbas nonetheless apparently agreed to authorize a PA delegation to meet Hamas representatives in Cairo the following week to discuss reconciliation in a more narrow framework that had been guiding talks in Yemen and Senegal in the previous months. According to Hamidi, the delegations would discuss (1) establishing a "technocratic" government with neither Fatah nor Hamas representation and (2) organizing early presidential and parliamentary elections. Hamas representatives agreed to consider this proposal, Hamidi said, and a Hamas delegation (possibly led

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by Meshal himself) was coincidentally already in Egypt and seeking to meet Egyptian officials on the subject.

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But Sees Other Palestinian Groups, Including PIJ  
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16. (C) In what many here interpreted as a direct snub of Hamas, Abbas met July 7 with Palestinian Islamic Jihad SecGen Ramadan Shallah, after which Shallah denied that he was carrying messages from Hamas to Abbas. Abbas also met PLFP-GC Deputy SecGen Talal Naji. According to a Damascus-based Palestinian source loosely affiliated with Fatah ("I support neither Abbas nor Hamas,") Abbas heard repeated criticism of the PA's talks with Israel in the absence of a unified Palestinian position. Abbas defended the PA's continuing participation in peace talks and expressed frustration with Hamas for openly criticizing him personally and questioning his commitment to Palestinian unity in a letter sent from Meshal to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

17. (C) Meanwhile, Hamas officials blasted Abbas in the press for being willing to meet with Israeli PM Olmert but not a fellow Palestinian, noting "the PA President's refusal to meet with the Hamas leadership in Damascus was to some extent in response to the clear American veto against an inter-Palestinian dialogue." We have heard these comments further enraged Abbas and deepened his distrust of Meshal, according to a Palestinian source here. Still, Abbas reiterated his strong desire for Palestinian reconciliation in his pre-departure press conference.

18. (C) Comment: We're hearing that SARG officials privately blame the Saudis for convincing Abbas not to meet Meshal because the Saudis view Palestinian reconciliation as the preserve of Mecca. After telling the Norwegian FM he would not press Abbas too hard to meet Meshal, this appears to be exactly what Bashar did. Syria's single-minded focus on an Abbas-Meshal meeting was not backed up by any alternative

"success" for the visit when Abbas stuck to his guns. The visit resulted in a setback to Bashar's efforts to use the Arab League mantra to promote Syria's influence in the region and demonstrated the limited flexibility in Syrian diplomacy.

CORBIN